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Urban orature and resistance: The case of Donny Elwood

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From their very origins, contemporary African artistic creations have been works of resistance. Born from the struggle against colonialism, these works continued in this trajectory when independence failed to deliver on the aspiration of the masses. Today's artists follow in the footsteps of their predecessors; resisting all forms of social injustice, economic inequality and political oppression that bedevil the post-independence arena. Using resistance aesthetics as critical tool of analysis, this paper seeks to examine the concept of resistance in the music of Donny Elwood. It aims at showing that urban orature, to which category Elwood's music belongs, is one of those sites in the postcolonial context where the struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression is continuously waged. The paper argues that, with its emphasis on sense and rhythm, and not dance, Elwood's music effectively communicates the artist's protest against socio-political contradictions in the postcolonial space while sensitizing the masses on the need for change. The discursive perspectives in his art reside in the interface between social interactions in the urban milieu and urban orature (witnessed in the blend of musical varieties, instruments and message). These effectively register his social commitment as an urban artist.

Keywords: Cameroon; Donny Elwood; music; post-independence space; resistance aesthetics; urban orature.

Introduction

The subject of artistic commitment is as old as human society. This is so because artists are members of given societies who participate in their own way to ensure that their communities become better places to live in. The manner in which they do so, however, is often a crucial subject in the discussion of art. Frank Lentricchia, in *Criticism and Social Change*, indicates the choices available to the artist in this regard. He notes that art opens up radically divergent social functions for the artist. He or she may employ his or her art "on behalf of a dominant hegemony by reinforcing habits of thought and feeling that help sustain ruling power [...] or he or she may work counter-hegemonically as a violator, in an effort to re-educate (inform), to pin us to the wall in order to assist in the birth of a critical mind [...] In the widest sense of the word, he or she would encourage cultural revolution" (147–8).

In contexts such as Africa, where, in the words of Syl Cheney-Coker (3056), there are "few channels of dissent" for the masses who suffer in silence under the brunt of "fascist repression from political and military adventurers" and are exposed, in the words of Romanus Mouneke, to the "disastrous effects of hunger, disease,

malnutrition and general unrest," (1), the committed artist has no choice than to work "counter-hegemonically", using his or her art in a pointed manner in the revolutionary struggle of those at the margins whose voices and choices have been gagged and rendered redundant by the hegemonies in place. He or she employs art to "provoke critical reflection," as Lentricchia notes above, "using it as a means of raising social awareness that would eventually contribute to the task of achieving a better" society, as M. S. C. Okolo observes elsewhere (13). In these viewpoints lie the basis of the functional paradigm of art in Africa, a functional dimension emphasised by artists and critics like Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Syl Cheney-Coker, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Niyi Osundare, among others. Osundare (21), for instance, notes that "commitment is not mere abstract aesthetics but a single minded obligation to social change". This point is buttressed further by Ngũgĩ (118) who says, "true African literature is the literature of struggle, a struggle of ordinary people against those forces of oppression in their societies".

Osundare and Ngũgĩ advocate the need for art in Africa to be engaged in the battle for right and just causes. Such involvement is a hallmark of the kind of progressive art that Ngũgĩ (118) again refers to when he says, "the progressive African [artist] has no choice than aligning himself with the revolutionary forces of change at every historical phase of the struggle". Ngũgĩ here bears witness to the historical bond that art has enjoyed with society in Africa. In effect, African cultural productions from time to time have exhibited a dialectical relationship with history, politics and folklore. As products of history, they have contributed significantly at each phase of the struggle to the liberation of the continent. In *négritude* writing, for instance, there is a high level of consensus between political and cultural nationalism. *Négritude* poets like Léopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop and Bernard Dadie used their art for the emancipation of the continent from colonial occupation.

Contemporary artists, in domains like popular music, continue to function in this light. Such music, drawing from and rooted in the urban space, for the most part, has the capacity to reach a wider audience than other forms of art, like literature. In this way, the music becomes an effective site in which artists infiltrate the threatening space of the contemporary world with dissent and self-assertion. Here, they give voice to the voiceless whose predicament they articulate. In the same stride, these artists hold a dialogue with power in the public arena. This is a powerful resistance technique, if one agrees with Albert Hirschman (23) that the classical political response to dissatisfaction with any institutional performance is "voice, the capacity to express in whatever form, one's dissatisfaction". In Cameroon, the music of Donny Elwood functions in this regard. His songs constitute an ideological weapon through which socio-political contradictions in post-colonial Cameroon and Africa are laid bare. While employing rhythmic effects to bring the people to enjoy his music, the poet-musician deftly promotes the development of a critical mind through the issues

raised in song. He moves the masses, not only to become aware of the reality of their situation but to also take the necessary steps to bring about change. In this article, Elwood's music is ranked in the class of resistance literature.

Resistance literature, according to Selwyn Cudjoe and Barbara Harlow, is "an act or set of acts [...] designed to rid a people of their oppression and it so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous aesthetic principle [...] a category of art which emerges as an integral part of an organised struggle or resistance for national liberation" (qtd. in Mongia 78). While Elwood's music might not speak of organised resistance to oppression, there are, nevertheless, elements of protest against different forms of repression in the post-independence setting in Cameroon in the songs. This is an indication that this music has, as primary objective, the criticism of all that is inimical to man's welfare in society. The aim of such criticism, as noted earlier, is to bring about social change at either the individual or collective levels. Indeed, as the audience savours the music, whose emphasis is on word and rhythm rather than dance, (unlike the cases of Elwood's contemporaries Lapiro de Mbanga, Longué Longué, and Afo a Kom), the message is effectively assimilated. Herein lies a resistance aesthetic that is further buttressed by a style that incorporates elements from the poet-musician's traditional roots and modern experiences. Furthermore, the music's emphasis on contemporary Cameroon situates it within "geopolitical considerations" which, according to Barbara Harlow, define resistance art.

Contextualising Donny Elwood: The artist and his work

Donny Elwood's real name is Ella Owoudou Dieudonné Albert and he hails from Ebolowa in the South Region of Cameroon. Born in 1968 to parents with a pygmy ancestry, Elwood grew up in this traditional environment before attending primary and secondary schools in Ebolowa where he obtained the Baccalauréat. He then enrolled in the University of Yaoundé to read Economics. At the dawn of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s Elwood was inspired by the humour of French comedians like Coluche and Les Inconnues to create a theatre group called Nul' Art with a group of friends from the university. The aim, according to the musician, in an interview with Fanny Pigeaud, was "to see whether it was possible to start saying certain things without getting into trouble" (Pigeaud 2). In effect, as Pigeaud further notes, comedy enabled the poet-singer to "raise serious issues while sending everybody up" (2). These intimations emphasise Elwood's perception of art as an effective weapon, which he employs to say what he thinks about society and a means to move that society to examine itself for the better. He corroborates this in an online interview when he avers that, "le texte est un prétexte pour nous de dépeindre la société dans laquelle nous vivons pour essayer de tirer des sonnettes d'alarmes [...] de sensibiliser les gens par rapport à des problèmes qui minent; la

pauvreté, la mort ... " (Elwood & Bimogo).¹ It was also in Nul'Art that the musician honed his voice and manipulation of musical instruments like the guitar, for, as he argues, "on voulait fait de la musique, de l'humour qui vient du sketch, par ce que nous avons une culture du théâtre" (Elwood & Bimogo).²

Elwood's musical career blossomed and began to gain stature; a situation crowned in 1996 with his winning a musical contest organised by Radio France International. Hailed variously as a poet-musician whose capacity to manipulate French and other languages to serve his purposes is legendary, Elwood's compositions are in the category of vocal music in which generally, to borrow the words of Paul Steven Scher (226), "literary text and musical compositions are inextricably bound". The symbiosis between literary and musical inclinations, in this context, indicates that the literary aspects of Elwood's music should be seriously considered given that it is through the literary text that resistance thought appears.

The artist has two albums to his credit, namely, *Negro et beau* (1997) featuring such hits as "Négro et beau", "Mon cousin militaire", "Akao Manga", "Izazou", "Pygmée", "Anabela", "Odontol" "Salomé" and "Négro et Beau." *Eklektikos* (2001) is, as the title suggests, an eclectic album with more varied rhythmic hits such as "Turlupiné", "Tomber des nues", "En haut", "Mort d'amour" "Marie", "Ekang" and "Ecoute". The artist has already finished work on another album, entitled, *Offertorium* consisting of ten songs, which promises to be in the same afro-rhythmic tradition rooted in the special cords of the guitar, the *bikutsi* and *pedalé*, characteristic of the first two albums.

Elwood's music is an artistic blend of a variety of musical genres and forms drawn from the traditional and the modern. In the interview with Bimogo cited earlier, he asserts that in addition to the obvious traditional *mvét* forms, employing oral literary devices like proverbs, stories, formulaic expressions and humour, he has equally been influenced by other musicians like the French Georges Brassens, the Cameroonians, Francis Bebey and Ottou Marcellin, as well as African protest artists like the Congolese, Zao, and Pierre Akendengue of Gabon. His music integrates such forms as jazz, blues, salsa, and the *ekan* and *bikutsi* drawn from his traditional background. Such a transcultural perspective in the music can be read as a mark of resistance, if one agrees with Nicolás Guillén that the very fact of giving equal status to both traditional and modern Euro-American forms, in any artistic work, is a challenge to the hegemonic biases of Eurocentric cultural forms which consider those from the margin as inferior (qtd. in Harlow 75). In Elwood's music, as my analysis portrays, both traditional and modern musical forms are given equal status. This is reinforced by the interaction of a variety of instruments like the bass guitar, conga drums, the guitar, keyboard and percussion. The presence of jazz elements, it should be further emphasised, reinforces the resistance ethic for, as Steve Oakes and Gary Warnaby (408) have noted elsewhere, jazz has "historically been regarded as a form of musical counterculture".

Resistance in the music of Donny Elwood: thematic and aesthetic paradigms

Amilcar Cabral notes, “culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops” (42). The environment informing Elwood’s music is post-independence Cameroon, in particular, and Africa, in general. This environment is one riddled with corruption, poverty, maladministration, social prejudice, economic crisis and patronage politics. Elwood is alive to this context as his music foregrounds the socio-political contradictions at play here while calling on the masses to re-examine themselves in the context of global civilisation. Such a re-examination begins with rejecting certain stereotypes that have become ingrained in the psyche of Africans because of the encounter with the west.

Homi K. Bhabha (75) has observed, “the stereotype is the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse [...] which turns the colonial subject into a misfit—a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’ that threatens to split the soul and whole undifferentiated skin of the ego”. This stereotyping, which took root in the colonial era, portrayed the African as “both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants [...] the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child [...] primitive, simpleminded and yet the most accomplished liar” (Bhabha 82). This typecast, resisted by cultural nationalists like David Diop, Léopold Senghor and Chinua Achebe, continues to haunt the contemporary African urban context where the majority of the people still prefer Eurocentric modes of existence. Elwood condemns the attitude of his contemporaries to hanker after western ways of dressing, living and being (often to the detriment of their own cultural identities and values) through an affirmation of his blackness and all that it entails in “Négro et beau”.

The song is predicated on a negation of the racially inflicted insults and psychological injustices that the black man has suffered throughout history:

On dit qu’un négro n’est jamais beau
On dit qu’un négro c’est toujours un petit macro
toujours un petit escroc
toujours un petit rigolo
toujours un petit gigolo
qui n’aime que le fafiot³

Words and phrases like “n’est jamais beau” (*never handsome*), “macro” (*crook*), “rigolo” (*clown*), “gigolo”, “n’aime que le fafiot” (*only loves easily earned cash*), all point to the perception of the black man from a dominant Eurocentric perspective. This is further emphasised elsewhere in the song through the use of essentially negative imagery to delineate the way in which the physical features of the black man became objects of ridicule in a rising tide of Eurocentrism: “la tête du négro comme la noix du coco / les yeux du négro comme les noyaux du goro / les dents du négro comme les dent du crocro”.⁴

James C. Scott (111–2) has noted that “resistance originates [...] from the pattern of personal humiliations that have characterised a particular form of oppression”. In the context in which Elwood operates, the nomenclature underlined above legitimises a negative vision of the black man and at the same time becomes the foundation of resistance in the musical piece. Through the technique of abrogation, the poet musician rejects this image and at once affirms the beauty and vitality of the black man’s colour, his physical and cultural features when he says “je suis négro est je suis beau / je suis né gros / j’ai le nez gros / black tout de go / une peau melaninée a gogo / ça se voit de près ou de loin / de jour comme de nuit, surtout dans le noir.”⁵ The negative images that the black man is accredited with become the very elements of his valorisation and identification in the concert of global cultures. This perspective is reinforced by the play on the word “négro” and the regular rhyme and rhythm achieved by the /o/ sound in words like “macro” (*crook*), “rigolo” (*clown*), “faiot” (*cheap cash*) “poto-poto” (*mud*), “sissongho” (*elephant grass*), “beau” (*handsome*), and “akoro” (*go away*), occurring at the end of lines in the song. This is négritudinist in perspective (see Senghor’s “Murders” in Soyinka 96).

At another level, the musician refers to African historical figures like Kokumbo, Kisito, Oliver Tambo, Steve Biko, Ki-Zerbo and Manu Dibango. These men, who have, either in their cultural and political postures, validated or affirmed a black personality and way of life, are the models the musician wants people to emulate in their daily struggle to make meaning out of life instead of privileging a western way at variance with that of Africa. The lyricism, achieved through the repetition of the /o/ sound at the end of these names, does not only accentuate the music of their laudable lives that the artist wants his listeners to emulate, but importantly underscores, to use the words of Msia Kibona Clark and Mickie Mwanzia Koster (xxv), “the relevance of their ideologies on contemporary African society and politics”.

Ariel Dorfman (126), in *The Empire’s Old Clothes*, observes that resistance poetry participates in a radical critique of what has been called the “standard, uniform patterns” of cultures drawing from western ideological domination disseminated through conventions of literary genres. This simply means that artistic production in the postcolonial space is rarely uniform as the artist may follow standard European forms as Elwood does but then may integrate aspects from his cultural background, as I noted earlier on. At another level, there is also what Bill Aschroft and others (39) call the concept of “interlanguage”. This is “the fusion of the linguistic structures of two languages [revealing] that the utterances of a second language learner are not deviant forms or mistakes but are part of a separate but genuine linguistic system”. This fusion of languages, in a single context, giving all of them equal status, is an indication of the kind of resistance aesthetics Dorfman refers to above. In addition to a mastery of the Beti language, Elwood has a great command of the French language that has been acknowledged by critics. For instance, a post on the website of

the French Cultural Centre of the Republic of Benin notes that the “Donny Elwood manie la langue française avec autant de dextérité qu’un chirurgien son scalpel. Il transformes les mots en armes redoutables renversant les préjugés.”⁶

In the song “Négro et beau”, for instance, the musician adheres to the conventions of western poetic art in his use of rhyme and parallel structures but equally employs the Ewondo, Pidgin English, English and French languages, to reach a metropolitan multilingual Cameroonian audience. As it were, significant portions of the song are in the musician’s home language while words like “sissongho” (*elephant grass*), “poto poto” (*mud*) and “black” are drawn from pidgin and English, respectively. It is worthwhile noting that the use of these items contributes significantly to the rhythm of the song which is achieved through refrains and the repetition of words and lines like “dje” (*what*), “Igni awok olun akoro” (*anyone who is not happy should quit*), and “je suis négro et je suis beau” (*I am black and handsome*). At another level, the use of the call and response—typical of oral tradition—emphasizes the poet-musician’s effective artistic communion with his target audience.

One would imagine that stereotyping is something only connected with Africa’s encounter with the west but this is not so. On the contemporary scene, those Africans who have become schooled in western ways and now inhabit the urban space tend to consider those from the rural areas as “uncivilised.” The case of the indigenous people group, the pygmies, who, because of their lifestyle, inhabit the forest regions of the eastern and southern regions of Cameroon, is an eloquent example. In the hit, “Pygmée”, the musician is up against the so-called civilised people who generally look down on the pygmies but take recourse to them at moments when they want to take advantage of their supposed magical powers. Such moments include the search for political or career promotions, saving a marriage on the rocks or enabling a football team to win a crucial match. Elwood satirises such duplicity, characteristic of the so-called civilised world, while at the same time celebrating the pygmies’ closeness with nature. The musician laughs at these “hollow men” of civilisation fame whose activities, in the name of progress, are detrimental to the natural habitat, the abode of the pygmies.

In this piece, Elwood’s subtle protest against hypocrisy and condescension is seen in his valorisation of the pygmy’s physical features and closeness with nature. The pygmy’s large nose, his filed teeth and nudity, hitherto elements of denigration, are valorised as elements defining his affinity with nature. This is all the more succinct when one takes into consideration the need to protect the forests threatened by a marauding, grasping urban culture which is at variance with the natural lifestyle of the pygmy. In this song, the regular rhyme pattern achieved through the alliterative /ei/ sound in words occurring at the ends of lines like “palétuviers” (mangroves), “sangliers” (wild boars), “carnassiers” (carnivores), “nudité” (nakedness), “intimité” (privacy), and “gibier” (game), emphasise the musician’s continuing resistance against all forms of stereotypes wherever they may be found.

Elwood valorises the African identity, its peoples and way of life, in the songs above, but also takes a critical look at the migrant African experience in “Tomber des nues” (Taken aback). Here, the story-telling device, typical of oral tradition, and the use of proverbs, become the weapons through which the “parvenu” attitude of some diaspora Africans, the negation of African cultural values, and the individualism characteristic of the west, are laid bare. The speaker’s personal experience in France, “pays des libertés absolues” (land of utter freedom), constitutes the poetic focus in the song. The poet is shocked that in this land of absolute freedom, the African is still judged by “les idées préconçues” (preconceived ideas). He is perceived as “obscur” (obscure), “un illustre inconnu” (an illustriously unknown quantity), and treated with marked disdain. The repetition of the /u/ sound in words like “préconçues” (preconceived), “obscur” (obscure), “inconnu” (unknown), emphasises the musician’s inability to understand such an incongruous situation where, paradoxically, unlimited freedom breeds all forms of vice such as

Les jeunes qui s’entretuent,
Des abus des hommes en tenue,
L’amour et la bouffe qui tuent,
Les usines qui polluent,
Les valeurs se dévaluent,
La pédophilie continue et le vol évolue
La télé les films de cul⁷

While this incongruous situation characterises most western societies, the speaker’s major preoccupation, however, is with those Africans who, after getting to Europe, abandon their cultural values and assimilate European ways. The use of proverbs and witticisms such as “il faut se prêter a toute situation” (be on the alert), “si tu ne sais tailler un piquet” (if you do not know how to sharpen a peg), “observe l’oreille du chien” (watch the ear of the dog), and “imiter en regardant n’est pas facile” (imitation through observation is not easy), foreground the musician’s critical posture in this light. Through these proverbs, Elwood seems to be saying that diaspora Africans ought to adapt to their new contexts but not at the expense of their own cultures.

In the political domain, Elwood satirises the materialistic ethos of political leadership as well as the masses who view public office as a conglomeration of offices to be seized and manipulated for personal gain. He decries, in a humorous vein, the excesses of the ruling elite and the patronage politics that is the *modus operandi* of the contemporary scene in “En haut” (On top). In effect, the title of the song situates us in the contemporary Cameroon context where the appointment of one’s relations to high office is seen as raising that person above the others, literally putting the person “on top” of others, as it were. The necessary connection between politics, economics and culture is already established in the song’s title. At the same time,

the use of the phrase “en haut” draws from the urban linguistic milieu which means “privileged.” Again, like I observed above, such semantic relexification underscores the poet-musician’s revolutionary capacity to bring the modes of language of those at the margin to the centre.

The persona, in the song, is from the masses and envisions this political appointment as the appropriate avenue for wide ranging changes to take place in his own life. This conception of things draws from the adage that when one’s brother is on top of the plum tree, his brother on the ground eats the best fruit. While the speaker details the change of status, the privileges and the general advantages that will accrue to him, he, nevertheless, in a seemingly innocent tone, gives us glimpses of the culture of political appointments in the post-independence space. It is clear that these selections are not generally based on merit but on the ambition of individuals who do everything in their power to get a post:

Si mon frère est nommé, il a tout tenté
Ça n’a pas été aisé:
Il a vu les grands sorciers pygmées
Il a traversé les ruisseaux,
Marché à travers les sissonghos.
Il a dû dormir dix jours le nez dans l’eau
Il a dansé nu les pieds sur le feu, du bikutsi avec les vieux chimpanzés.
Imaginé les écorces qu’il a croqués
Comme un cabri les herbes qu’il a broutées,
Les décoctions qu’il a ingurgitées.⁸

Visiting witch doctors to have them secure one a political appointment is common practice in the post-independence context, as noted above. Merit is generally sacrificed on the altar of greed and philistinism. In inserting this picture of the political environment towards the end of the song, Elwood, in a humorous vein, registers his disgust with this state of things. Humour, preponderant in the lyrics, is characterised, in the main, by equivocalness and ambiguity. These aspects, according to Tejumola Olaniyan (52), also point to resistance. Placing the aforementioned image of politics at the end of the lyric indicates that, while having fun, the audience should rethink its joy about appointments that may just require the same tactics to remain in power, as one notes in “Pygmée. The satiric posture in the song comes largely through humour as we imagine the appointee enduring weird forms of initiation, like sleeping with his nose in water, dancing naked with chimpanzees on fire and drinking all sorts of concoctions in order to have their desires met.

Rhythm is achieved through assonance and alliteration as well as through refrains and choric responses that include lines from the Beti language. The musician also makes an express call for the use of traditional African musical instruments like the

tam-tam (carved out wooden drum), the *tambours* (drums), and *balafons* (xylophones), to celebrate the brother's appointment. However, as noted above, the implication here is consonant with a resistance aesthetic that seeks to foreground African traditional musical instruments as valid in a global context where hegemonic western forms have sought to relegate these to the margins.

One outstanding feature of the socio-economic environment of post-independence Cameroon, which comes under the critical lens of the artist, is the economic crisis of the nineties that wrought significant changes in the social landscape. The poverty and sharp drop in the purchasing power of the citizenry, engendered misery, man's inhumanity to man, prostitution, and despair, which manifested itself in drunkenness and callousness. Many Cameroonians who could no longer make it in the city retreated to the villages to engage in agriculture as alternative to the callous urban milieu. This atmosphere is critically x-rayed in "*Salomé*", "*Akao Manga*", "*Turlupiné*", "*Odontol*", "*Anabela*", "*Mon cousin militaire*" and "*Dick, Dick*".

"*Akao Manga*", for instance, is a diatribe against fair weather friendship and materialism rendered in story form. When the economy of the country was booming, *Akao Manga* was a very rich man who was generous to others, unlike other rich people who are stingy. As a result, *Akao Manga* had many friends, a beautiful wife and a large family.

Akao Manga était bien,
Tant qu'il avait beaucoup d'argent
Tout le monde tout le monde
Aimait bien Akao Manga
Akao Manga était bien
Tant qu'il avait beaucoup d'argent⁹

In the extract above, the foundation of friendship is established on the material and this is what the musician challenges. We discover that when this foundation is invalidated, thanks to the economic downturn, these same people keep away from the man because "*la galère dégoulinaut de ses doigts / la misère se lisait sur son vieux visage ridé*".¹⁰ The personification of suffering and misery, in the lines above, underlines the extent to which the economic crisis pushed people into untold poverty and at the same time revealed the inhumanity of man to man. With *Manga's* wealth gone, everyone deserts him and he becomes a pariah. The vivid image of "*Akao Manga avait plongé pieds et mains liés dans la pauvreté*" (*Akao Manga* plunged into poverty with feet and hands tied), does not only underscore the extent of his poverty but equally intimates that some other issue may be the cause of his predicament. *Manga's* friends now treat him as the scum of the earth and would not deign to come to his aid. He is now an epitome of appalling misery as captured in words and phrases like "*paumé*" (at a loss), "*orange pressée*" (completely sucked

out), “fauché” (broke), “foiré” (poor), “enfoiré” (impoverished). By using the story form, Elwood, in veritable *mvvet* tradition, satirises the materialistic ethos on which the contemporary urban space is built and sustained and, in the same stride, holds up those values that would make it more humane.

In “Dick Dick”, equally, the artist again employs the narrative technique to highlight man’s inhumanity to man, general misery and environmental issues; all outcomes of the economic crisis. In the hit, the musician begins by delineating the material space of the moment when “la crise économique ayant frappé tous les pays pauvres sous-développés, mon pays ne fut épargné” (The economic crisis having affected poor underdeveloped countries, my country was not spared). Such a posture intimates universality in the fortunes of all underdeveloped countries, but the rest of the story emphasises the peculiarity of the protagonist’s predicament, a consequence of the insensitivity and egotism characteristic of the urban milieu and, by extension, of the postcolonial space. In this space, one is told, “on naît seul, on vit seul, on finit par mourir seul. Chacun s’assoit Dieu le pousse” (One is born alone, lives alone and eventually dies alone. Every one for himself, God for us all). The proverb, in the quote, subtly satirises this philosophy that negates the communal ethos on which African society is built. Its effect on man, animals and the environment can only be disastrous. It is little wonder then that when the narrator retires to the village to cultivate his ancestral lands, accompanied by his faithful dog, Dick, he discovers that man’s callous and self-centred attitude, witnessed in deforestation, has rendered the land arid.

Here, the musician highlights the fragility of the postcolonial economic environment that is largely dependent on ever diminishing natural resources for livelihood. The elasticity of such a space is captured in the story when the persona arrives in his village, only to find that even the animals and the fish are now so scarce that, his faithful companion Dick becomes his meal to temporarily alleviate severe famine. The metaphor of “eating” effectively defines power relations in the postcolonial space. Those in positions of power gravitate towards the state in order to achieve personal and economic gain often to the detriment of the poor who are literally “devoured” by the insensitive politics in place.

In this piece, alliteration and assonance in the repetition of the /p/ in words like “frappé” (attacked), “pays pauvres sous-développés” (poor under developed countries), “mon pays ne fut épargné” (my country was not spared), and the /u/ sound in words like “mafflu” (mafia), “dodu” (plump), “joufflu” (chubby), “fessu” (fat bottomed), and “ventru” (potbellied), serve to add to the music and accentuate the issues raised in the song. Furthermore, the incorporation of the Beti language in the song continuously translates the musician’s desire to bring the language to the centre, as I observed above.

Conclusion

My analysis of Donny Elwood's lyrical pieces in this paper underscores the extent to which the African urban artist does not only hold up a mirror to society but, also functions as a social thinker who dialectically deals with questions of existence in the contemporary urban milieu. The musician's dissection of the postcolonial urban space is aimed at stimulating social change. He explores issues of identity, corruption, poverty, social prejudice, patronage politics and man's inhumanity to man, in a bid to contribute to the emancipation of suffering people wherever they are found. This perspective is reinforced by the way in which Elwood ingeniously manipulates musical varieties and instruments—showcasing the traditional and the modern—to bring across his message. The discursive forms of resistance in the music reside then in the intersection between the social interactions in the urban milieu and urban orature. These effectively underline his commitment as an artist. As his interviews and the songs I analysed underline, foregrounding traditional musical forms and rhythms, in a context where these are often relegated to the margins, is a conscious ideological position that is revolutionary in perspective. These elements gesture towards our consideration of Elwood's music as resistance art.

Notes

1. "[...] to us the musical text is a weapon through which we paint a picture of the society in which we live to draw people's attention, to bring them to an awareness of such ills as poverty, death." This and subsequent translations are mine unless stated otherwise.
2. "We wanted to do music and the humour which comes from sketches given that we had a culture of theatre".
3. "it is often said that the black man is never handsome / it is often said he is always a small crook / always a small cheat / always a small clown / always a small gigolo / who wants nothing but easy money."
4. "the black man's head is like a coconut / the eyes of the black man like the goro (local) nuts / the teeth of the black man like those of the crocodile."
5. "I am black and I am handsome / I was born big / I have a big nose / altogether black / a rich melamine pigmented skin / which can be seen from far or near / in the day as in the night, especially in the night."
6. "Donny Elwood manipulates the French language with the dexterity of a surgeon, his scalpel. He transforms words into formidable weapons capable of invalidating prejudices."
7. "youths who kill themselves / the excesses of the forces of law and order / love and food / factories that pollute / values devalued / continuing paedophilia and theft / on the television pornographic films (abound)."
8. "if my brother has been appointed, he has tried everything / it was not easy / He consulted great pygmy witchdoctors / He crossed brooks / Walked across sissonghos / He had to sleep for ten days with his nose in water / He had to dance the *bikutsi* naked with his feet in the fire with old chimpanzees / imagine the tree barks he had to munch / and like a cabri, the herbs he chewed / the concoctions he swallowed."
9. "Akao Manga was good / as long as he had much money / everybody everybody / really loved Akao Manga / Akao Manga was good / as long as he had much money."
10. "Extreme suffering dripped from his fingers / misery could be read on his old ridden face."

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